Best Practices in Referee Development

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Background

- National Referee Coach, US Soccer
- State Director of Referee Instruction, Illinois
- Member, Referee Advisory Committee, Midwest Region, US Youth Soccer
- Assessor for PRO Development Group
- Former FIFA and MLS Referee
Short Term vs Long Term

• Short term--these practices are best followed in a tournament setting, with a limited number of games and referees

• Long term—these are practices to follow over the course of a season or more

• In either case, there must be a connection between the assigning of referees and the observation/evaluation/coaching of the officials
Short term case study

• Examples from Midwest Region as practiced by Chairs Chico Villarruel (2017-) & Jonathan Meersman (2010-2016)
Other Staff

- Tony Crush—assistant referee administrator
- Margaret Domka—mentor coordinator
- Rich Grady—mentor coordinator
- Dan Lusicic—site coordinator
- Brian Miller—assistant referee administrator
- Instructors and Ref-Coaches assigned by US Soccer
Initial Game Assignments

• Assigning follows a clear protocol for the initial phase of games (round robin play)

• Factors based on
  – Referee grade
  – Experience at regional events
  – Ranking from state associations
Assigning Protocol

• 3 days of round robin play
• Referees with higher ranking/grade/experience normally scheduled for 2 days of middle/4th
• Lower end of the spectrum gets 2 days of ARs and 1 day of middle/4th
Advantages

• There is a clear pathway and protocol that all officials are told about
• No surprises or accusations of politics
• System is transparent
Role of Assessing

• Each game is observed by a ref coach/mentor
• Every official gets feedback on every performance
• There are also roving staff members who rotate around the complex and watch parts of games
• Feedback to staff compiled throughout the day using technology (google forms)
Instruction

• During round robin phase, referees split into small groups of 15-20
• Each group is led by an assessor/mentor
• Idea is to get group participation and give feedback in a small setting
• Field work incorporated on the rest day for teams prior to semis
Increasing Capacity of Ref Coaches

- Goal for 2018—have National Ref Coaches available to conduct shadow assessments for State assessors looking to become Nationals
- This will hopefully make the event more attractive to assessors
- National coaches will pass on best practices from their level
Adjusting Assignments

• Officials who have distinguished themselves will have their assignments adjusted upward
• Those who have struggled will have theirs adjusted downward
• All adjustments are performance based
• Officials can rise rapidly in the tournament hierarchy beyond the limitations initially imposed by the assigning policy
Selection for Semis and Finals

- Transparency and accountability are key
- Entire referee staff participates
- Reps from 2 state associations invited as non-speaking observers
- All available officials posted on wall by grade
- All relevant data points considered
  - Assessments
  - Personal observations by staff
Selection to National Championships

• Same process followed as outlined above
• Additional advantage of fewer games being played at one time gives opportunity for multiple sets of eyes on each game
• State that an official is from is never a consideration for why that person is picked
Positives of this approach

• Merit based
• Tries to exclude factors other than performance
• Ref coaches and mentors feel that their input is desired and valued—ref coaches without a specific assignment for semis will also rove and give feedback on all officials they observe
• Referees feel that the system is fair and that everyone has a chance
Challenges of this model

• Requires a high degree of teamwork and trust
• Requires enough ref coaches and mentors to cover every game
• Competing with other events for National Ref Coaches
• Need both quantity and quality of ref coaches to make this work well
Longer Term Referee Case Study

- Example is taken from Illinois
- Support of State Referee Committee is vital
- Bob Balciunas, SRA
- Tim Deters, SYRA
- Abbey Okulaja, SDA
- Rich Grady, SDI
- Gus Bender, IYSA Pres.
- Claudio Frigo, ISSA Pres.
The Illinois Example

- SDA, SDI, and SYRA are all National Ref Coaches for US Soccer
- As such, all are exposed to latest concepts in referee instruction and development put forward by US Soccer
- SDA and SDI are assessors for PRO Development Group
- Focus on creating opportunities for advancement and education

Long term goal—get our officials into the professional leagues
Adult Mentoring Program

• Administered by Abbey Okulaja
• Currently has 34 participants
• Participants identified by the Referee Committee in a collaborative process
• Officials range from grade 8 to grade 3
• All participants commit to attending training and doing required homework
Resources for Program

- 10 mentors who informally observe games
- This group includes 5 current or former National Referees
- Instructional Resources (in addition to Ref Committee Members)
  - Peter Balciunas (current PRO)
  - Eric Boria (former FIFA AR, current PRO)
  - Michael Kennedy (PRO)
Program Structure

• Group meets twice a month from January through November
• Each training incorporates
  – Fitness
  – Field work
  – Classroom session run by Okulaja, with assistance from Grady, Deters, and others, focusing on FIFA Futuro clip method
Use of video

• Officials now expected to use their own games as source of analysis
• Have to get copies of games to analyze
• Refs expected to show clips to the group
• Refs also expected to analyze their performances in writing to head of group
End of Year

- Each official gets feedback on their progress
- Committee evaluates whether or not to keep individuals as part of the group
- Committee considers inviting new members
- Members can be removed for performance or for not meeting attendance commitments
Coordination

- Okulaja is local assignor for US Soccer responsible for PDL, NPSL, and Open Cup assignments in addition to DA games
- Tiers of referees created for assignment purposes by position (ref/AR) and age of game
- Academy matches at U18 level all assessed at no expense to referees
- Focus on National and State level ref coaches
- Other assessments as requested
- Cooperation with local assignors of adult leagues
What do referees need to progress?

• Appropriately challenging games from a variety of levels and sources
• Referees cannot expect to progress by focusing only on
  – Youth
  – Adult
  – Entry Level Pro
Youth Structure

• Advantages of high level youth competition
  – Organization
  – Quality fields
  – Can challenge fitness

• Disadvantages of high level youth competition
  – Environment is too well organized
  – Hard to work on player management
Adult Competition

• Advantages
  – Present challenges for player management and game control
  – Exposure to multiple styles of play and ethnic backgrounds

• Disadvantages
  – Not as organized
  – Fields can be less than ideal
Entry Level Pro

• Advantages
  – Introduction to pro game expectations
  – Learn to manage players in this environment
  – Different level from local leagues

• Disadvantages
  – Level of professionalism can vary widely from place to place
  – Season occurs in short window
  – Not that many chances to go around
Referee Development

• Cannot rely on exclusively on any one level of games to help the referee advance
• Cooperation between assignors is vital
• Must be consistent monitoring and feedback
Youth Mentoring Program

- Run by Deters (SYRA)
- Designed for officials under 18
- Most meetings to provide training are virtual
- Hard to do in person meetings for minors traveling long distances
- Occasional in person meetings on weekend
- Coordination between SYRA and assignor for State Cup and President’s Cup
- Consideration for selection to regional events
Additional Factors

• State Presidents Gus Bender (Youth) and Claudio Frigo (Adult) provide budget to fund both mentoring programs

• Funding support for referees to travel to important competitions out of state
  – Academy Showcases
  – Disney Cup
  – Youth Regional events
  – Adult Regional events
Does this work?

• Numerous officials from both programs have progressed to the National Referee level and gotten assignments in professional leagues
  • MLS/NWSL
  • USL
  • NASL